Response to Intervention

What Is It? Why Do It? Is It Worth It?

By W. David Tilly III, PhD, Coordinator of Assessment Services, Heartland Area Education Agency, Johnston, Iowa

Helping kids! That's the informal answer most of us give to the question of why we got into education. Far too often, though, this passion-fueled idealism gives way to cynicism, frustration, and skepticism as we are confronted with all of the "new initiatives," "bright ideas," and "reforms" that seem to be mandated on a weekly basis at the state and federal levels. I must confess to frustration at times.

However, I remain extremely optimistic about the future of our kids—they seem to be resilient despite us. And I am especially hopeful about one particular movement that has started to take hold across America. That movement is called Response to Intervention or RtI. In fact, I am greatly encouraged, for reasons I hope will become clear as this article unfolds.

I wrote in another publication that RtI is likely the single best opportunity we have had to improve education for all students with disabilities—and students without them—that has occurred since the passage of the Education of the Handicapped Act in 1975. This is a bold and perhaps biased statement. For many years, I've watched students with disabilities being placed in programs that did not result in positive change. We are all on the constant lookout for something better for our kids. RtI practices offer the opportunity to create that something better.

What Is RtI?

Lest I end up sounding like some sort of educational zealot, let me explain. First off, RtI is not an instructional program, a curriculum, a strategy, or an intervention. It is not an educational revolution or fad. Indeed, it is more about evolution than it is about revolution. RtI, stated simply, has three general components: (1) it is a logical structure for allocating precious instructional resources efficiently and targeting them specifically to student needs—all student needs; (2) it is a commitment to use the best findings from our current and emerging knowledge base (scientific research) as we go about our instruction; and (3) it is a commitment to use a logical, decision-making framework to guide our instruction (this has been variously referred to as data-based decision making or the problem-solving method). Let me expand on each of these a bit.

Resource Allocation Structure

RtI is implemented by bringing together several components in a single school. The collaboration and coordination that is required is the good news—and it is also RtI's biggest challenge. Even within any single school district, there are notable differences from site to site: the available resources, the teachers, their backgrounds, the history, the politics, the culture, the curriculum, and the students are all going to vary to some degree. Any initiative that is not sensitive to and respectful of these variations is doomed to failure—how many packaged

programs can you think of that have not worked because they failed to consider these variables?

One of the biggest challenges in improving results for our students involves giving them what they need. Unfortunately, the historical structures in our schools have gotten in the way of that happening. In many cases, we have organized our resources by categorical program or funding stream (e.g., Title I, special education, English language learners, talented and gifted, etc.). But knowing that a student qualifies for Title I assistance, for example, tells us absolutely nothing about that student's specific learning needs. However, most RtI systems adopt what is called a tiered model of service delivery (Figure 1). The basic model reflects much of what we all know about reality: in any group of students within our school, instructional needs will vary. Tier 1 represents the largest group of students, those who are educationally healthy and remain so through instruction in the general education (some call it "core") curriculum. We also know that some smaller group of students, depicted in Tier 2, will need something supplemental (also referred to as "strategic instruction") to their core instruction to support their learning and raise their achievement to proficiency or above. Finally, we also know that there is an even smaller group of students, Tier 3, who will need intensive instruction if their learning is to be appropriately supported.

Some argue that we already have a tiered system: we had general education, Title I, and special education; so how is this different? The answer is that in the tiered system, resources are not allocated based on broad generalities like economic condition or the catch-all "learning disability." They are allocated and specifically matched to exact needs that students have demonstrated based on their performance on efficient diagnostic assessments.

Scientific, Research-Based Strategies

In RtI systems, many, many different strategies can and are being used with groups and individuals. These strategies all share a set of characteristics. First, they all respect the rights and the human dignity of children and their families by responding to the uniqueness of specific, individual needs. Second, to the extent possible, they have scientific research supporting their effectiveness. Just as the FDA protects consumers from hucksters and ineffective medical treatments, the RtI principle of using research-based practices protects us from wasting time and protects our students from being subjected to ineffective practice. One caveat, however, is that there are many areas in education where we don't have definitive research on what works best. In these circumstances, we have to implement promising practices, monitor the effectiveness of the strategies, and modify our implementation based on the results we get. And third, the strategies that are part of RtI implementations work. If they do not, they are systematically rejected and replaced.

Decision-Making Framework

One important component of RtI systems is that they are self correcting. Though we wish it were otherwise, in education we cannot predict with certainty whether any instruction, strategy, or intervention is going to work with an individual student before we try it. While we do have research-based strategies and those things we believe in and that work for some, if we are honest with ourselves, we know that nothing works for everyone. As such, we need to have in place for all students a system that gives us feedback when they are learning and that helps us make good instructional decisions when they aren't. That's specifically what the problem-

solving method does within an RtI framework—it provides a structure for using data to monitor student learning, in an instructionally relevant way, for groups and individuals so that good decisions can be made. Stated simply, when we use data to make decisions about our instruction, we make better decisions.

Where Did RtI Come From?

The answer to where RtI comes from is multifaceted. Many of the practices that are used as a part of RtI implementation (e.g., curriculum-based measurement, formative evaluation, learning strategies, peer tutoring, direct instruction, behavior analysis, lots of research-validated reading strategies, etc.) have their own longstanding and rich foundation in research—in many cases, over 30 years worth. So, in one regard, RtI practice has been around for a long time. But there is the part of RtI that puts all of these practices together in a logical and rational way that can work in schools; this was developed in public schools, not in the research literature. The earliest school-based implementations of what has grown to be known as RtI (in various sites in Pennsylvania, Minnesota, and Iowa) have been working on implementation for only about 15 or 20 years (a little longer in the case of Pine County, Minnesota).

One of the special things about RtI is that our field-based people are working closely with our researchers not only to figure out what works but also how to make it work. This latter part has been missing from too many attempts at improving our system, and it's finally begun happening.

RtI has been described as a system structure that is designed to allow the optimally efficient delivery of effective practice in schools. One very exciting dimension is that RtI doesn't tell you what to think; it tells you what to think about.

Do We Have to Do This?

In the IDEA '04 statute (the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, amended in 2004), RtI is offered as an option for schools, not a requirement. But it's critically important for all educators to remember the following: RtI has evolved in the last 15 years or so through a confluence of (1) understanding that what we have been doing isn't getting us as far as we need to go in terms of student outcomes; (2) understanding that there are some relatively new, effective practices out there; (3) recognizing that, in order to make this all work, we can't tinker around the edges—we have to take on the whole system at once and reengineer it around teaching and learning; and

(4) good, bad, or indifferent, understanding that we are now living in the age of accountability. More of our students must do better more of the time. RtI is a very reasonable way to do this.

RtI as a concept currently lives in the IDEA '04 statute under the section related to identifying specific learning disabilities (SLD). This placement has caused some to think that RtI is about identifying students with SLD. While it is true that data collected in RtI systems can be used as one component of a comprehensive evaluation for special education eligibility determination, this was never RtI's purpose, which has always explicitly been to improve instruction for students. Anthing else is tangential.

Is It Worth It?

RtI is not a panacea. It will not wash the dishes or mow the lawn. In fact, it's a heckovalot of work (I'm a transplanted Californian living in Iowa; this is one of my new Midwestern words). It also makes a huge difference in learning. The data coming out of implementation sites across

the country is generally positive. A majority of the research data being published is supportive. It seems like we may be on to something here that has the potential to create for kids the kind of life-changing results that we all got into this for in the first place.

W. David Tilly currently serves as coordinator of assessment services for Heartland AEA 11, an effort that serves 55 public school districts and 36 accredited nonpublic schools. Dr. Tilly has also served as a consultant for assessment, research, and innovation at the Iowa Department of Education. His particular focus was on Iowa's Renewed Service Delivery System (RSDS), which foundationally changed the way that special education is conceptualized and delivered in Iowa. With Dr. Tilly's guidance, Iowa has been refining and implementing a Response to Intervention/problem-solving model for approximately 15 years.

Dr. Tilly works regularly with states, school districts, federal offices, and national organizations on improving educational results for all children. He is also the author or co-author of 24 publications, mostly focused on education innovation, systems change, and improving educational results. His research and policy interests include Response to Intervention, educational innovation, and improving educational results.